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Music History: 1700-Present

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## Musical and Social Trends in Twentieth-Century Colombia

Radical and creative breakthroughs in the arts have often occurred during periods of social or political anxiety. After World War II, many visual artists felt that the world had become desensitized by the number of graphic images coming back from the war. Artists turned to abstraction in reaction to this, hoping to evoke deeper emotional responses from their audiences. Shifts in creativity and philosophy are often discussed in the context of European history and art, although they are certainly not unique to the continent. Some of the biggest shifts occurred in other continents. As Europe's colonization efforts exported European culture and classical music, countries around the world began rethinking European genres, styles, and movements, reforming them to fit their own sense of cultural identity. This is especially true in Latin America. Latin American society is the result of the mix of three distinct cultures: European culture brought by white colonizers, African culture brought by black slaves, and American Indian culture brought by native peoples. Throughout this paper, the music and movements embraced by twentieth-century Colombian composers will be explored. It is important to take the work of composers of color at face value without needing to compare them to the works of white-European composers in order to determine their value; however, in this paper, parallels will be drawn between classical music in Colombia and classical music in Europe as a way of highlighting the achievements made in a country that is usually not discussed

in the classical music world. Although musical achievements in Latin America have been historically overlooked, Latino composers have drawn on tri-cultural influences and their own national identities to create a musical output that at least parallels, if not surpasses, what has come out of Europe.

It is most helpful to compare Colombian classical music to Spanish music, as Colombia's main cultural link to Europe came by way of Spanish conquistadors. Spanish music contains an interesting mix of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions, which makes its overall sound distinct from other European musical styles.<sup>1</sup> This unique melting pot of musical influences is paralleled in Colombia, where European, African, and American Indian musical traditions were blended together to produce a unique musical style. However, Spanish is not the only external influence in Colombia. Many Colombian composers studied in France, Germany, or America, among other countries, drawing inspiration from impressionistic and nationalistic schools and cultivating the connections they needed to gain international acclaim.

In any country in the world, no matter the cultural and musical tradition, musicologists can be sure of one thing: "music does not exist without a social context."<sup>2</sup> After gaining its independence from Spain in 1810, Colombia was left with a rigid, complex social structure that left white Latinos on top, *mestizos* in the middle, and Afro-Latinos on the bottom. These socio-economic classes affected the development of Colombian classical music. "A theme that seems to emerge in virtually every Latin American culture is the tension between the 'refined' music of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2011), 29.

<sup>2</sup> "Part Two: Issues and Processes in the Music of South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean", in *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, ed. Dale A. Olsen and Daniel E. Sheehy, (Routledge, 1998): 27, [https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Creference\\_article%7C1000223254](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Creference_article%7C1000223254).

the elite and the ‘coarse’ music of the underclass.”<sup>3</sup> A prime example of this tension is seen in societal attitudes towards different folk dances. For example, both the *bambuco* and *cumbia* originated in rural peasant areas of Colombia, and both evolved to contain American Indian, African, and European influences. Both dances are incredibly lively with distinct meters and rhythms. However, the *bambuco* dance is seen as predominantly Andean in origin, while the *cumbia* dance is African in origin. (Never mind that historians have noted the *bambuco* can be traced all the way back to Afro-Colombian peoples.) This misconception led to an easier acceptance of the *bambuco* into Colombian high society and classical music than the *cumbia*. In fact, white and *mestizo* Colombians preferred to listen to high-class Cuban boleros and guarachas and American jazz and foxtrot more than Afro-Colombian music.<sup>4</sup> In spite of all this, the *cumbia* was able to slowly work its way up through society and eventually became important repertoire in compositions written for ensembles of all kinds, from wind bands to salon orchestras.<sup>5</sup> Another dance, the *pasillo*, is derived from the European waltz. It had many nicknames, including the *Valse del País* (waltz of the country), the *Valse Redondo Bogotano* (the round waltz of Bogotá), the *Valse Apresurado* (the hastened waltz), the *Estrós* (Strauss), and the *Varsoviana* (Warsaw thing).<sup>6</sup> It was first introduced in Colombian salons for the elite, only later making its way into folk traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Arguably the most influential composer of his generation was Guillermo Uribe Holguín (1880-1971). He is even referred to as “the patriarch of Colombian art-music,” just as Rossini is

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<sup>3</sup> Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 265.

<sup>5</sup> Juan Sebastián Ochoa, “The Cumbia in Colombia: An Invention of a Tradition”, *Revista Musica Chilena* 70 (December 2016): 35–36, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0716-27902016000200002>.

<sup>6</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 391.

<sup>7</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 391.

considered to be the father of *bel canto* opera.<sup>8</sup> Holguín studied violin and composition at the *Schola Cantorum* in Paris and was influenced by the Debussy Impressionist School.<sup>9</sup> He wrote symphonies, piano concerti, violin concerti, violin sonatas, an opera, and 300 *Trazos en el Sentimiento Popular* (Pieces in Popular Style), as well as chamber music and other compositions.<sup>10</sup> He was also an important advocate for classical music in Colombia. He founded the National Symphony Orchestra of Colombia through his work with the National Academy of Music.<sup>11</sup> Holguín's music is the perfect example of the scope and legitimacy of Colombian classical compositions. His small-scale popular style pieces for piano are easily as charming and inventive as Robert Schumann's miniatures. Béla Bartók and Manuel de Falla collected and compiled folk melodies native to their respective countries as a way of reclaiming their national heritage. Holguín also did this by famously incorporating folk dances such as the *bambuco* and *pasillo* into his piano and orchestral compositions.<sup>12</sup> His use of these dance forms is similar to Frederic Chopin's use of mazurkas in his piano compositions and Johann Strauss II's use of waltzes in his orchestral works.

Other composers with folkloric tendencies were Antonio María Valencia (1902-1952) and Pedro Morales Pino (1863-1926). Valencia "introduced Colombia to modern European piano literature."<sup>13</sup> His sense of nationalism involved combining impressionistic techniques with

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<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Chase, "Creative Trends in Latin American Music-I," *Tempo* 14 (1958): 32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944117>.

<sup>9</sup> Juan Carlos Hurtado Lorduy, "El Inmerecido Olvido De La ópera Furatena De Guillermo Uribe Holguín," *Pensamiento Palabra y Obra* 16, no. 16 (2016):51, <http://revistas.pedagogica.edu.co/index.php/revistafba/article/view/3975/3449>.

<sup>10</sup> Chase, "Creative Trends in Latin American Music-I," 32.

<sup>11</sup> Hurtado Lorduy, "El Inmerecido Olvido De La ópera Furatena De Guillermo Uribe Holguín," 51.

<sup>12</sup> Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 398.

dances such as the *bambuco*, *pasillo*, and *cumbia*.<sup>14</sup> Morales Pino competently and creatively blurred distinctions between his between classical and popular compositions. He was an accomplished *bandola* player and wrote many famous *pasillos* and orchestral pieces where “he employed folkloric materials and nationalistic themes.”<sup>15</sup> As well as being a recognized songwriter and composer, Morales Pino arranged classical pieces for ensembles such as *estudiantinas*, a more traditional ensemble that consists of guitars, *bandolas*, and *tiples*.<sup>16</sup> This syncretism of and tension between folk traditions, classical traditions, and popular traditions that is so prevalent in Colombian compositions makes it hard to draw distinct lines between the genres.<sup>17</sup>

Alejandro Wills Vargas (1887-1943) is one of the most famous songwriters in Colombian history. He straddled the line between popular and classical music, and his work could ostensibly be classified in either camp. He was known for writing over 200 popular songs and pieces for *estudiantinas* that showcased *bambucos*, *pasillos*, *danzas*, *vals* (waltzes), *tangos* (an Argentinian style), *boleros*, and *joropos*.<sup>18</sup> He was extremely political, and so his work was patriotic and nationalistic in nature.<sup>19</sup> He was one of the first Colombian artists to record with an international label, was able to tour all over the Americas and Spain, and is credited with exporting the *bambuco* to Mexico.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 398.

<sup>15</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 393-394.

<sup>16</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 394.

<sup>17</sup> Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> “Alejandro Wills (Vida y Obra),” filmed 1997, YouTube Video, 21:02, posted June 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuRPuBsJRGA>.

<sup>19</sup> “Alejandro Wills (Vida y Obra),” filmed 1997, YouTube Video, 21:02, posted June 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuRPuBsJRGA>.

<sup>20</sup> “Alejandro Wills (Vida y Obra),” filmed 1997, YouTube Video, 21:02, posted June 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuRPuBsJRGA>

Not all nationalism saw the syncretism of folk music with upper-class European styles. Many “nationalist Latin composers were contemporaries of Stravinsky, Bartók, Janacek, and Copland,” and their creativity in forming new, modern perspectives are easily comparable to the creativity of their contemporaries.<sup>21</sup> In true modern fashion, composers developed a “distinctive nationalist style that abstracted from, synthesized, and transcended” styles and forms that came before them.<sup>22</sup> There are also Romantic elements present in twentieth century Colombian music that, in Europe, were more prevalent in the nineteenth century. This is due to political and social turmoil in Colombia in the twentieth century, such as the presence of guerilla warfare in the ‘40s and ‘50s that was nicknamed “La Violencia” and killed 300,000 Colombians.<sup>23</sup>

Another trend in the incredibly diverse output of Colombian music in the twentieth century was neoclassicism.<sup>24</sup> Composer and diplomat Luis Antonio Escobar (1925-1993) studied in Bogotá, Baltimore, New York, Berlin, and Salzburg.<sup>25</sup> His neoclassicism is most obvious in his *Divertimento No. 1 for Orchestra* (1950) and *Concertino for Flute and Orchestra* (1951).<sup>26</sup> Like Alejandro Wills Vargas, his work was internationally acclaimed, and he won two Guggenheim Fellowships for his compositions.<sup>27</sup>

As seen in the work of such composers as Morales Pino, Valencia, Holguín, and Escobar, Colombian classical music is incredibly diverse and encompasses many styles, European and otherwise. Although history often fails to recognize the achievements of composers of color, the

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<sup>21</sup> Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Olsen and Sheehy, ed., *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 2 - South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean*, 115.

<sup>23</sup> Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 269.

<sup>24</sup> Chase, "Creative Trends in Latin American Music-I," 32.

<sup>25</sup> Susana Salgado, "Escobar, Luis Antonio (1925–1993)," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture*, Volume 3, 2nd ed., ed. Jay Kinsbruner and Erick D. Langer, (Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2008): 133, [http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3078902111/GVRL?u=tel\\_a\\_belmont&sid=GVRL&xid=54d676da](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3078902111/GVRL?u=tel_a_belmont&sid=GVRL&xid=54d676da).

<sup>26</sup> Chase, "Creative Trends in Latin American Music-I," 32.

<sup>27</sup> Salgado, "Escobar, Luis Antonio (1925–1993)", 133.

rich musical language found in just one relatively small country that for decades was wrapped up in violent political turmoil should serve as a wake-up call. Colombia is just one of twenty-one countries in Latin America, each one with its own distinct culture, perspective, and musical output. If classical performers, historians, and teachers continue to perpetuate a culture of indifference towards the musics of Latin America, audiences and students will continue to miss out on a rich, diverse, and all-encompassing body of repertoire to study and perform.



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